Overcoming Barriers for Criminalized Clients

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Ex-offenders face an array of prejudices when trying to reintegrate society – including from the people trying to help them

I am a nationally published author (whoop-de-do), registered addiction therapist, founder and executive director of a charitable organization for the prevention of drug abuse, and founder and president of a personnel agency that placed ex-convicts. In my peak, I had 75 men on payroll, 50 to 70% were ex-cons.

Laurentian, McMaster and Simon Fraser University were kind enough to award me a certificate, diploma and degree while Cambrian College provided me with a decent business education. Oh yes, I also served eight years in Canadian penitentiaries where I learned to mind my business, bluff my way through deadly confrontations and read many of the classics, but was never handed a certificate of accomplishment for any of that.

You can imagine how few people or organizations are willing to help stigmatized individuals like myself. I discovered, to my chagrin, that many employment counsellors are downright loath to help. They have their reasons and I will address these concerns here, but before I do, I need to let you know that I don't like receiving unsolicited advice, so I am not going to give any. My aim is to share my experience as a counsellor who has worked with criminalized populations and also as a consumer of services as a stigmatized and criminalized client. I thought this dual perspective would be helpful.

As a consumer, stigmatized people, like little ol' me, slip through the door every day looking for a break, support, guidance, understanding, validation and a job, but often leave crushed, humiliated, utterly hopeless and rudderless. Some of these men and women have been good members of society for many years but still can't catch a break. We, the former bad boys and girls, are not looking for accolades for doing the right thing, but we certainly do not need or appreciate the added barriers. We just want to work, feed our kids, put some savings away for a rainy day and maybe even travel.

So, assuming we, as employment counsellors, want to reduce and remove some of these barriers, what can we do to make our workplace more inclusive to both help former offenders find work and even hire them as employment counsellors? I figure something can be done but it will require the right attitude. This shift in our thinking will certainly be a two-way street, where the ex-offender demonstrates a record of pro-social behaviour and where the counsellor demonstrates an honest desire to help. This proposition is based on a simple belief that the professional counsellor possesses goodwill, intelligence and a drive to improve. It will require integrity, experience and professionalism.

We, the alleged enlightened and educated class are sometimes quite jaded and closed-minded, yours truly included. That's right, I have trust issues, too. I also need to work on my attitude. We are quite often fearful and intolerant. Sometimes we just don't like ex-cons, period. Most of us are unwilling to put ourselves out there for the ex-con for some of the following reasons:

- We, the straight-laced and blameless (if there are any of us around – not me, I already confessed), have not faced adversity and have no direct experience with the transformative process, so we don't trust it or don't believe in it
- We hold negative views of the once anti-social and criminally involved
- We are afraid
- We may have been victimized
- We don't want to burn our bridges with employers
- We do not want to associate our organization with former felons
- We don't want to waste our time on a less desirable candidate when we can help one of the blameless

No worries, we the former hard cases totally understand because we feel the same about each other until we take time to get

nother better. However, I have sent many men to construction jobs without any substantial screen

have never ever been ripped off or hurt. The men either showed up and worked hard or they did n folks I placed.

For more sensitive placements, however, more diligence is required, and this is where getting to know one another pays off, so one of my strategies is to work with the individual for a time until we become familiar with each other. It does not take long to see when someone is serious in their aims. They will have made efforts to change, have been out of jail for a time, meet appointments, show up clean and sober, wear appropriate attire, honour obligations, complete assignments and communicate honestly, respectfully and calmly. They will have no qualms providing me with written references and will have no hesitation discussing their former ways. These folks, like me, have no issue with disclosure once we respect and understand one another.

All I need to do as a professional practitioner is respect their privacy and preserve their dignity. This requires a self-check where I ask myself some very pointed questions such as:

1. How important is it for me to know
2. Am I violating any laws by asking
3. Is it relevant to the job sought
4. What are my motives for asking

These and other questions help me navigate the relationship and animate the dialogue. It is equally important for me to act as a good role model, never losing sight of the power differentials. More importantly, I must keep in mind my critical role as gatekeeper to the workplace. These folks depend on me to transform their lives by helping them find meaning, acceptance and security in the world through employment. This is a huge responsibility and one I should not easily shirk because of fixed ideas.

Ultimately, working with criminalized populations is more about what kind of person and professional we want to be than it is about protecting others. If we do our due diligence, be honest with ourselves, pay attention and develop the relationship, our job will be made very easy and, consequently, deciding to invest time to help or not can be done with confidence and conviction. No need for charades, shadows and excuses.

In a nutshell, change is a two-way street. I had to change, grow up, mature and own up to become a professional counsellor, and I needed to change to become an effective, empathetic and professional counsellor who acts ethically and with integrity. I am so very happy I was able to overcome these barriers because experiencing the transformative process myself and seeing it take root in others is the most fulfilling part of my life.

Ritchy Dubé *is an average guy who seeks a normal existence. He was born and raised in Sudbury, ON and has a desire to make life more equitable for all. Ritchy invites your comments at sendakite@gmail.com.*

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